

VII

Some General Propositions: An Interpretative Summary

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Introduction

The six papers preceding either report single disasters or analyze certain patterns of behavior that are inferred from numerous instances of disaster. Like the rest of the scientific literature on disaster behavior, the present publication is based upon case studies. In themselves, however, individual cases have no importance in science. They acquire scientific importance only insofar as they show the way to new and broader inquiry, or provide further verification of existing hypotheses. This is not to say that case studies are unimportant, or less important than other procedures and types of data. On the contrary, any case may be a "crucial" case, especially in areas like disaster research where so little is known about the variables themselves, let alone their variations as determined by comparative or experimental methods.

One way to break down the particularity of individual case studies, of course, is to derive from them propositional statements; tentative ideas about variables and their relations for more general verification. In this brief chapter we ask "What propositions about human social behavior in disasters may be inferred from the case-based papers preceding?" The reader who cares to do so may find other propositions or he may clarify and amend those which the author has found and published below with trepidation almost offset by the reassurance of pre-publication readers! What the propositions lack in rigorous conceptual statement—and this is very considerable—may be offset by their comprehensibility and practical meaning for administrators concerned with disaster relief. The propositions ringed by quotation marks are taken *en toto* from the papers cited.

These propositions, like the cases from which they come, utilize the system idea described in the Introduction. Accordingly, they are grouped and conceptualized with reference to A) The Force, B) Initial Perception, C) Organizational Adjustment, and D) Solidarity, Conflict and Tension Release.

A. The Force as a Factor in Behavior

Fritz' comments on types of disaster lead directly to several highly general propositions concerning 1) the force or destructive agent as one variable interacting with general features of the organization affected, namely, 2) the social situation at impact, and 3) the previous degree of cohesiveness or

solidarity. These and other generalizations from the disaster cases may also apply to certain less rapid and less dramatic stress situations, such as those occasioned by industrialization of agricultural societies.

- 1) Social disorganization and stress are the greater as a) the disastrous force is the more rapid, b) the period of forewarning the briefer, c) the disaster agent less well known and less clearly perceived.
- 2) Similarly, social disorganization and stress are the greater as a) the physical scope and destructiveness of the force are the greater, and as b) the length of time in which the force is directly exerted is the greater.

A variable limiting the operation of (1) and (2) above is the degree to which members of families and other primary groups are separated or dispersed at the time of impact.

- 3) The greater the dispersion of primary groups, the more stressful and disorganizing is the force.

Another limiting variable is the degree of pre-impact solidarity or cohesiveness of the organization.

- 4) The less solidary the organization, the more slow is recovery apt to be; depending, however, on the extent of shock at the loss of friends, relatives and property.
- 5) Loss-shock tends to be greater as social relationships are the more cohesive.

B. Initial Perception and Behavior

The papers by Spiegel, Fritz, Williams and Kilpatrick state or definitely suggest the first proposition regarding cognitive orientation. The other propositions are derived from at least one and often more than one of the four authors. No contradictions were identified.

- 1) Seeking cognitive orientation in the early period of impact, the individual tends to perceive and interpret disaster cues by reference to those causal agents and other features of his immediate environment with which he is familiar.
- 2) Seeking normative orientation in the period of first impact, the individual perceives that many of the usual social expectations are inappropriate and frequently violates them, though in terms of the new situation, his behavior may be altogether rational and adaptive.

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- 3) As long as individuals can congregate, interaction is intensified in the period of first impact, and especially within family groups.
- 4) Although first reactions to disaster generally tend to be more individualized and segmented, there is a greater tendency to perceive and act in terms of "we" rather than "me" as family life is the more cohesive and the community is less urbanized.
- 5) Panic, defined as an acute fear reaction followed by flight or attempted flight, tends to occur only in a situation of immediate danger from which escape appears impossible.
- 6) "Controlled withdrawal," i.e., where the withdrawal is not merely escape *from* the danger but movement *toward* a goal, is more common than panic.
- 7) Accurate perception, "correct decision," and effective preparation and action in disaster are the more likely as the relevant communication is the earlier, the more accurate, and the more widely diffused throughout the target population.
- 8) "Information about a future possible threat, which has not been previously experienced, tends to have relatively low value." (Williams, pg. 16, Hyp. 1.)

C. Organizational Adjustment

"Organizational adjustment" here refers to adjustive or adaptive behavior in all three interdependent systems (or sub-systems) noted in the Introduction: socio-cultural, perceptual, and communicational. All of the papers are reflected in the propositions collectively, but each proposition obviously does not refer to all three sub-systems.

- 1) Organized response in disaster situations is the more effective as previous solidarity is higher, plans of action are rehearsed, roles are well-defined, plans and roles are sufficiently flexible to cope with the unexpected and the unpredictable.
- 2) "Information about survival choices is a major determinant of survival behavior." (Williams, pg. 17, Hyp. 3.)
- 3) When the community leadership officially designated by plan prior to a disaster fails, informal leadership will emerge "spontaneously."
- 4) The effective community leader in a disaster situation—organizer, director, initiator, coordinator—will possess one or more of the following characteristics: previous experience in disasters or in roles whose skills are disaster-related, absence of strong ego-involvements in the particular disaster, assurance of the safety of his intimates.
- 5) The previous structures of power, prestige and dif-

ferential association are altered in each disaster situation in response to the new imperatives of group adjustment and survival.

- 6) Following the period of first impact, and progressing throughout the course of recovery and reconstruction, pre-existing social structures will tend to be re-established though never in fact duplicated.
- 7) Although organizations in disaster must look to their environments for more varied and numerous resources than before, they may also be hampered by excessive "assistance."
- 8) Adjustive needs and mechanisms will differ as between cultures (like Yap) where disasters are expected and those where people are taken by surprise.

D. Solidarity, Conflict and Tension Release

Our last propositions center on personality and affect for the most part. The papers by Spiegel, Fritz and Kilpatrick are the sources.

- 1) Previous inter-group differences are lessened, co-operation and social solidarity are heightened in the first post-impact period; followed by a reversal of these trends as time goes on.
- 2) The health and "morale" of an organization in disaster are higher in the first post-impact period than subsequently.
- 3) After the first post-impact period, there is a tendency for pre-disaster tensions, as well as for those generated in the wake of disaster, to be expressed and perhaps resolved in the course of reconstruction.¹
- 4) Conflicts between formal groups are mainly in connection with authority relations between local and outside officials, including officials of relief and control agencies. "Scapegoating" is less common than it is sometimes thought to be.
- 5) "Prolonged subjection to conflicting perceptual cues induces emotional depression, followed by elation when the conflict is resolved." (Kilpatrick, pg. 18, Hyp. 5.)
- 6) Hostility and blame are expressed against officials, and perhaps others, if they are seen to offer relief on a too discriminate or "business as usual" basis, if they appear arbitrary in their use of authority, or if pre-disaster dissatisfactions exist which are merely heightened or triggered in the disaster situation.

1. The periodicity with which tensions develop and gain expression in disaster situations suggests a possible parallel with the "phase movement" of laboratory groups performing contrived tasks in R. F. Bales' experiments. See T. Parsons, R. F. Bales, and E. A. Shils, *Working Papers in the Theory of Action* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1953), Chapters 4 and 5.